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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 DOHA 000871

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [OA](#)
SUBJECT: (C) SCENESETTER FOR DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE'S
SEPTEMBER 9 VISIT TO DOHA

Classified By: CDA Michael A. Ratney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Embassy Doha welcomes you on this brief stop in Qatar. You last met with Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani (HBJ) in Washington in December 2006 in your capacity as DNI. In April 2007, HBJ also became Prime Minister, long an inconsequential portfolio held by the Amir's brother. Despite rumors at the time that HBJ would be "promoted out" of the Foreign Ministry, allowing him to focus fully on the private ventures that already consume his time, he has retained full control of the MFA and, apparently, the confidence of the Amir.

12. (S) Although our relationship with Qatar remains solid at the military, energy, and education levels, at the political level it has steadily soured over the past year. Intelligence cooperation is now the worst of all GCC states. HBJ appears to have grown jealous of our relationships with his regional rivals and annoyed that we don't give him the attention he feels he deserves, including senior-level visits and visibility in our own regional initiatives. Iran also hangs heavily over the relationship: the Qataris believe we have plans for Iran, perhaps even military plans, that we are not sharing with them, and they fear that a U.S. military strike on Iran could bring devastating retaliation on Qatar.

13. (C) Our regional allies positively foam at the mouth when Qatar is mentioned, although we have seen no smoking gun for most of their accusations. Our own list of grievances with Qatar is long enough, but at the core are its high-level engagement with Hamas leaders; support for Syria and its allies in Lebanon; maddening behavior on the UN Security Council, including serving as a flak for Sudan and Hezbollah; and a failure to follow through on its stated commitment to forgive Iraqi debt. HBJ has never cared for the GCC plus 2 format, and was the only minister to blow off the Secretary's last meeting with the group in Sharm el-Sheikh entirely. In practical terms, the most vexing thing of late is the new GOQ

policy defiantly requiring that all diplomatic pouches be x-rayed, effectively shutting down our classified pouch deliveries since May 1. HBJ needs to be pressed hard on this as the GOQ's approach is consistent neither with international law nor with friendly relations between strategic allies.

¶4. (S) If Qatar were any old pesky emirate, we could just ignore them. But we just have too much at stake here. Al-Udeid is central to CENTCOM operations from Iraq to Afghanistan to the Horn of Africa. If the political chill spreads to our military relationship - and thus far it has not - our air operations could face serious difficulties. Qatar is exceedingly friendly to U.S. energy companies. Soon, nearly 20 percent of ExxonMobil's global revenue will derive from Qatar and the small emirate will in 2009 become a major supplier of LNG to the U.S. U.S. universities are thriving here and rule of law (if not full democratization) is taking root slowly, though firmly.

¶5. (C) At this point, HBJ and the Amir are likely waiting out the Administration hoping that things improve in 2009. In the meantime, Qatar's extraordinary wealth and CENTCOM's dependence on Al-Udeid may only feed their hubris and sense that we need them more than they need us. This is not a healthy state of affairs, and it serves neither our interests, nor the Qataris', nor our regional allies'.

¶6. (C) The rifts are not irreparable. Qatar has always responded well to high-level contact; likewise, isolating Qatar has only had a negative effect on its behavior. This visit should help. On specific issues, HBJ should be: (1) pressed to back down on the GOQ's new policy on diplomatic pouches; (2) asked follow through on the commitment to Iraqi debt relief the GOQ made in 2004; (3) urged to provide badly needed assistance to the Palestinian Authority; (4) urged to back off its engagement with Syria and its allies in Lebanon; and (5) briefed on our views of Iran and our intention to confront its egregious activities in Iraq and elsewhere.

¶7. (S) But more broadly, HBJ should be reminded that Qatar's policies are antagonizing governments in the region with which the U.S. has important relationships, isolating Qatar politically, and potentially frustrating our own regional efforts. As long as that continues, relations with this or any future U.S. administration are unlikely to improve. Qatar may not agree with everything the U.S. does or says in the region, but Qatar's interests are hardly served by reflexively taking contrary positions on issues of critical importance to us and its neighbors. Our military access here is vital, and we are appreciative. But Qatar should not forget that it gets something out of the relationship too: a strategic partnership with the United States that can never be replicated by the French, British or anyone else.

¶8. (C) In response, you should expect sharp criticism of our approach to the Israeli-Palestinian file and our efforts (and those of the Fayyad government) to exclude and isolate Hamas. HBJ's message will be that Qatar has no love for Hamas' ideology, but excluding them will doom any peacemaking efforts to failure. On Iraq, expect cynicism and pessimism about the Maliki government, though agreement that a hasty pull-out would be disastrous. And on Iran, HBJ will tell you that Qatar shares our concern about their nuclear program and revolutionary ideology, but Qatar's geographic proximity, vulnerability of its energy installations, and the fact that Qatar's massive off-shore gas reserves are shared with Iran, dictate a less confrontational approach.

¶9. (C) For additional background, following are more details on key issues in Qatar and aspects of our bilateral relationship.

U.S.-Qatari Military Relations

¶10. (S) At the strategic level, bilateral military relations

are generally excellent. An extremely advantageous (for the U.S.) Defense Cooperation Agreement governs the U.S. military presence in Qatar, which hosts approximately 9,000 U.S. forces, some 100 U.S. and Coalition aircraft, as well as the CENTCOM Forward Headquarters, the Combined Air Operations Center, SOCCENT Forward Headquarters, and other important DOD facilities. Qatar had no objection to stationing B1 bombers and Patriot missile batteries here, regularly send military personnel to the U.S. for training, and after years of sourcing their military hardware in Europe, are showing increasing interest in buying American. Nevertheless, CENTCOM has experienced considerable working-level problems, particularly customs clearance delays for military cargo and prickliness about perceived violations of Qatari sovereignty, that threatens to degrade U.S. operational readiness. These problems are being worked through CENTCOM-Embassy-GOQ engagement and, while troublesome, have thus far not bled into the larger political relationship.

UN Security Council

¶11. (C) The Qataris have been exasperating during their 20 months on the Security Council. (Like the U.S., they look forward to the end of Qatar's term this December.) When it serves their interests, Qatar sees itself as holding the Arab seat, claiming it must give regional interests priority over broader international security concerns. This has led to counterproductive Qatari behavior on Lebanon, the Palestinians, Sudan, and Iran, including its 14 to 1 consensus-breaking UN Security Council vote on Resolution 1696 in July. (Since then, however, Qatar has been part of two unanimous votes, UNSCR 1736 and UNSCR 1747, to impose sanctions on Iran's nuclear program.) On several occasions, Qatar has voted against our wishes (and often against a broad international consensus) even on issues such as Burma where it has no obvious interests. The one recent bright spot has been Qatar's support for our position in favor of an independent Kosovo.

Iran

¶12. (S) Qatari officials privately express concern about Iran's role in the region and its pursuit of nuclear weapons (which they believe is unstoppable). They agree with our analysis of Iran's revolutionary motivations and goals and note Iran's active support for subversive elements in the region. Qatar regards Iran as its major existential threat and fears - probably correctly - that it could face violent retaliation in the event of U.S.-Iran military conflict. But since they share with Iran the world's largest field of non-associated natural gas - the source of much of their future wealth - Qatar is reluctant to do anything to antagonize the Iranian government.

¶13. (C) At the May 24, 2007 bilateral Gulf Security Dialogue (GSD) we raised HBJ's earlier (and surprising) declaration that "Qatar would not serve as the base for any military operation against Iran." While acknowledging that the U.S. has no intention of launching military action against Iran at this time, we noted the tactical value of maintaining ambiguity around the question as a disincentive to Iran's aggressive posture in the region. The Qataris accepted the point and said they would aim to steer away from similar declarations in the future.

Iraq

¶14. (C) The Amir shares our view that restoration of order and a successful democratic transition are of paramount importance not only to Iraq but to the region. However, a feeling that Qatar has been excluded from regional Iraq-related diplomacy, along with a strong distaste for

Iraq's Shia-dominated government, drives Qatar's resistance to follow through on some of our priorities, including comprehensive debt forgiveness. While HBJ has expressed concerns about civil war in Iraq, he has also stated publicly that the coalition needs to stay in the country to establish wider security. The GOQ is not prepared to open an embassy in Baghdad, nor send a high-level delegation there, until the security situation improves dramatically.

Energy

¶15. (U) At over USD 60,000, Qatar's per capita income is ranked fifth in the world (and ahead of the U.S.). The country's vast wealth is a result of the successful development of its natural gas resources: Qatar is now the world's largest exporter of LNG. The country has plans for even greater expansion over the next five years, during which time LNG exports will more than double. But despite the focus on LNG, oil still accounts for nearly half of Qatar's energy earnings. The GOQ estimates Qatar's oil reserves at 27 billion barrels. Daily average production is currently estimated to be 806,000 barrels per day; at current production rates, oil reserves are expected to last 20 to 60 years.

¶16. (C) Qatar is friendly to U.S. energy companies: Since 1999, there has been USD 60 billion in foreign investment in Qatar's energy sector with the majority, about USD 40 billion, coming from U.S. firms, including ExxonMobil, Conoco Phillips, Chevron, Anadarko, and Occidental. Qatar plans to invest USD 70 billion in the natural gas sector over the next seven years. Following the recent CFIUS approval of \$2.2 billion development by Qatar Petroleum of the Golden Pass LNG terminal in southeast Texas, LNG exports to the U.S. should begin in 2009, eventually making Qatar our largest source of imported LNG.

Trafficking in Persons

¶17. (SBU) The dark underbelly of Qatar's spectacular energy-driven growth is the abysmal conditions of the thousands of Asian and South Asian workers brought in to build the country's roads and modern high-rises, and perform the services and manual labor that Qataris never will. Along with most of its Gulf neighbors, Qatar was downgraded this year to Tier 3 in the annual Trafficking in Persons report. There is growing sensitivity to the issue at senior levels - HBJ even likened the importation of labor to modern-day slavery in controversial remarks to a group of Qatari businessmen. But many influential Qataris - led by the prosperous but competition-free business community - strenuously resist anything that smacks of liberalizing labor and immigration laws, fearing an erosion of their privileged position in a country where they constitute at best one fifth of the population.

Al Jazeera

¶18. (C) Al Jazeera is by far the region's most prominent media outlet and the bane of many governments in the region, though no longer the irksome centerpiece of U.S.-Qatari relations. The network is now ten years old with an Arabic-speaking audience of some 50 million viewers. In November 2006 it launched an English-language edition with a potential audience of 70 million and ambitions to compete with the major U.S. and British satellite networks worldwide. Since early last year, the USG has seen a bumpy downward trend in inflammatory anti-Western bias and inaccuracy in Al Jazeera's content. Al Jazeera has increased its use of USG sources, limited its use of inflammatory terminology, and devoted more time to stories of interest in the region other than the U.S. role in Iraq. Al Jazeera's track record

remains far from perfect. Unprofessional, biased, and inaccurate reporting continues to appear on its newscasts, talk shows, and website. The USG has long objected to Al Jazeera's practice of airing terrorist-provided video tapes, though the terrorists increasingly prefer to use the internet to release these videos unedited.

Education

¶19. (U) Qatar's commitment to modernize its educational system is exemplified by Education City, a 2500-acre campus on the outskirts of Doha. Managed by Qatar Foundation, the umbrella organization chaired by the Amir's wife, Sheikha Mozah, Education City is home to five U.S. college branch campuses (Texas A&M, Carnegie Mellon, Weill-Cornell Medical School, Georgetown School of Foreign Service, and Virginia Commonwealth University), with some 800 students currently enrolled. Roughly 60 percent of the students are Qatari; others come from around the region and some from further beyond. About two-thirds of the students are women.

CT Finance

¶20. (S) Qatar is often accused (by Jordan, the PA, and others) of funneling money to Hamas, though we have never seen clear evidence that this is actually happening. The Qataris have been largely cooperative on counter-terrorist finance issues, apparently anxious to avoid letting their small but growing financial sector be exploited by terrorists. The Qatar Authority for Charitable Works monitors all domestic and international charitable activities and approves international fund transfers by the charities. Qatar has a Financial Information Unit that resides in the Qatar Central Bank; both entities can review suspect accounts. Local banks work with the Central Bank and the FIU on CT finance and anti-money laundering issues, and bank officials attend U.S.-sponsored conferences on these subjects.

Political Reform

¶21. (U) Qatar's own program of reform, launched by the Amir after he assumed power in 1995, could take a significant step forward when the government eventually holds first-time elections for its national legislature. Qatar has gone slow, seeking to establish an institution that reflects local social and political norms. The current sticking points are who will be able to vote (likely a fraction of Qatar's 186,000 citizens) and who may stand for office. HBJ has said he "hopes" that parliamentary elections will be held in 2008. Qatar's continual delay in announcing these elections may be the result of seeing how an elected parliament in Kuwait, strongly populated by Islamists, has worked against reforms initiated by the ruler. Qatari women have had the right to vote since the first election took place in the country in 1999, for the Central Municipal Council. Elections for the country's third municipal council took place April 1, and a woman was elected with the highest number of votes in any district.

RATNEY